

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center Science Brief for Resource Managers

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Science Brief PWRC 2003-42

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North American Cowbird Advisory Council

Description:

The North American Cowbird Advisory Council serves as an authoritative source of guidance and information on ecology and management of parasitic cowbirds. Three cowbird species are found in North America: (1) the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) has a national range and presently causes the most problems; the South American Shiny Cowbird (*M. bonariensis*) invaded Florida 10 years ago and is becoming established in the southern peninsula; the Central American Bronzed Cowbird (*M. aeneus*) invaded Texas at least 10 years ago and is well established in the Rio Grande valley. The North American Cowbird Advisory Council was established to serve the DOI agencies as well as state and local agencies with responsibilities for land and resource management. Co-chairs are Caldwell Hahn, PWRC, and Stephen Rothstein, UC Santa Barbara. These invasive cowbird species are a cause for management concern because of their extraordinary capacity for range expansion in conjunction with human development and because of the large number of songbirds that are affected by their parasitism. The Brown-headed Cowbird has expanded its range from the Great Plains to the entire continent over the course of the European colonization of North America. It has had a serious negative impact on 4 endangered species as well as on numerous other songbirds. The Brown-headed Cowbird is a complex species to characterize ecologically because it is an extreme host generalist, parasitizing 200 species and exploiting a staggering array of habitats. There is growing uneasiness at the high expense and indefinite duration of the large number of cowbird control programs that have been initiated across the nation as well as at the lack of information about basic cowbird breeding biology necessary to estimate the cowbird's impact on declining species. The two other cowbird species that have invaded the US much more recently are not as well studied or understood, but they are invading areas where songbirds are already subject to loss of habitat and heavy pressure from human

development. The degree to which the 3 parasitic cowbird species will overlap and parasitize hosts in the same communities is unknown.

Progress to Date:

FY'00: The council established a web site (<http://cowbird.lscf.ucsb.edu>) that serves as an authoritative source of specialized information on cowbird parasitism and control. The council prepared 3 technical bulletins: (1) evaluating the severity of cowbird parasitism on a particular population or community prior to initiating control programs; (2) designing a cowbird trapping and control program that minimizes impacts on non-target species; (3) monitoring both parasitism levels and host breeding success following cowbird control to evaluate the effectiveness and continued need for control programs. There are in the process of being posted on the web site. The council has provided consultative help at regional planning meetings.

Management Implications:

Management of cowbirds is improved and standardized by having one central source of information consisting of experts who are responsive, readily available, and consistent in technical guidance given.

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